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ABSTRACT

Different groups at different times have turned to founding documents of the United States to meet their needs and to declare their entitlement to the promises of the Revolution of 1776. At Seneca Falls, New York in the summer of 1848, a group of U.S. men and women met to discuss the legal limitations imposed on women during this period. Their consciousness of those limitations had been raised by their participation in the anti-slavery movement. Eventually they used the language and structure of the Declaration of Independence to stake their claim to the rights they felt women were entitled to as U.S. citizens. This digest places the events of the Seneca Falls Convention within the larger context of U.S. reform movements of the 1840s, discusses the influence of the Declaration of Independence on the Convention, and provides teachers and students with a sampling of social studies curriculum resources such as primary source documents, books, articles, and lesson plans available through local libraries or the World Wide Web. (Author/BB)

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The Seneca Falls Convention: Teaching about the Rights of Women and the Heritage of the Declaration of Independence

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Different groups at different times have turned to founding documents of the United States to meet their needs and to declare their entitlement to the promises of the Revolution of 1776. At Seneca Falls, New York in the summer of 1848, a group of American men and women met to discuss the legal limitations imposed on women during this period. Their consciousness of those limitations had been raised by their participation in the anti-slavery movement; eventually they used the language and structure of the Declaration of Independence to stake their claim to the rights they felt women were entitled to as American citizens. This Digest places the events of the Seneca Falls Convention within the larger context of American reform movements of the 1840s, discusses the influence of the Declaration of Independence on the Convention, and provides teachers and students with a sampling of social studies curriculum resources such as primary source documents, books, articles, and lesson plans available through local libraries or the World Wide Web.

Background of the Seneca Falls Convention. America in the 1840s was in the throes of cultural and economic change. In the years since the Revolution and the Constitutional Convention, the nation's geographic boundaries and population had more than doubled, the population had shifted significantly westward, and many Americans' daily lives had drifted away from Jefferson's vision of a nation composed of independent farmers. Instead, farmers, artisans, and manufacturers existed in a world built around cash crops, manufactured goods, banks, and distant markets. Historians generally refer to this shift from production for a local economy based on a series of shared relationships to production for a distant, unknown market as the Market Revolution. Not all Americans welcomed these changes, which often left them feeling isolated and cut off from traditional sources of community and comfort.

In an effort to regain a sense of community and control over their nation's future, Americans, especially women, formed and joined reform societies. Inspired by the message of the Second Great Awakening (a religious movement that emphasized man's potential and forgiveness of sin) and the Transcendentalist message of man's innate goodness, reformers joined together in organizations aimed at improving life in America. These groups attacked what they perceived as the various wrongs in their society, including the lack of free public school education for both boys and girls, the inhumane treatment of mentally ill patients and criminals, the evil of slavery, the widespread use of alcohol, and the "rights and wrongs" of American women's legal position. The Seneca Falls Convention is a part of this larger period of social reform movements, a time when concern about the rights of various groups percolated to the surface.

What brought three hundred men and women to this small upstate New York town in July 1848? Women of the Revolutionary era such as Abigail Adams and Judith Sargent Murray raised questions about what the Declaration of Independence would mean to them, but there had never been a large scale public meeting to discuss this topic until Seneca Falls. Many women participated in reform organizations whose goals were to improve the lives of others and to fight for the rights of those who could not speak for themselves, such as schoolchildren and the mentally ill, so the air was ripe for a close examination of women's rights as well. A consciousness-raising experience, however, was necessary to turn these women's thoughts to their own condition.

The triggering incident was a direct result of participation in anti-slavery organizations by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Anti-slavery societies proliferated in the Northeast region of the United States and in some parts of what today we call the Midwest. Many of these organizations had female members. In 1840 the World Anti-Slavery Convention met in London; some of the American groups elected women as their representatives to this meeting. Once in London, after a lengthy debate, the female representatives were denied their rightful seats and consigned to the balcony. It was at this meeting, while sitting in the balcony and walking through the streets of London, that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott met. Eight years later Stanton and Mott called a convention to discuss women's rights.

The Convention's Call for Women's Rights, 1848. On July 14, 1848, the *Seneca County Courier* announced that on the following Wednesday and Thursday a "convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women" would be held. The Convention issued a document titled the Declaration of Sentiments, a statement written by Stanton and modeled on the Declaration of Independence.

In adapting the Declaration of Independence, Stanton replaced "King George" with "all men" as the agent of women's oppressed condition and compiled a suitable list of grievances, just as the colonists did in the Declaration of Independence. These grievances reflected the severe limitations on women's legal rights in America at this time: women could not vote; they could not participate in the creation of laws that they had to obey; their property was taxed; and a married woman's property and wages legally belonged to her husband. Further, in the relatively unusual case of a divorce, custody of children was virtually automatically awarded to the father; access to the professions and higher education generally was closed to women; and most churches barred women from participating publicly in the ministry or other positions of authority.

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Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments proclaimed that "all men and women were created equal" and that the undersigned would employ all methods at their disposal to right these wrongs. David Walker, in his efforts to gain recognition of the legal rights of Black Americans, similarly used the Declaration of Independence in his call to the American people on behalf of the oppressed Black population, both freed and enslaved. In the 1840s and even today, the language of Thomas Jefferson resonates through American life. Americans from every background believe that the ideals of the Revolution are alive and well, and applicable to life in the present, just as the women of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention felt those ideals spoke to them.

Teaching with the Declaration of Sentiments. The Declaration of Sentiments provides an opportunity for teachers to bring historic documents into their classrooms in a variety of social studies courses.

The Declaration of Sentiments is brief, and the language used is familiar to most who encounter it. This accessibility gives the document great potential for classroom use. The Declaration of Sentiments can be incorporated into lessons on the Declaration of Independence or on the ideas of the Revolution, a lesson on life in America in the 1840s, or specialized units focusing on reform movements or women's history. The full text of the Declaration of Sentiments is available through several of the Web resources listed below.

World Wide Web Resources for Teaching about the Seneca Falls Convention and the Declaration of Sentiments. The following World Wide Web sites are a sampling of the many resources on this topic available to teachers and students of United States history.

- **Women's Rights National Historic Park**, Seneca Falls, New York. This site is maintained by the National Park Service and commemorates the Seneca Falls Convention and early leaders of the women's rights movement. It provides information about the convention itself, historic sites within the park such as the home of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the text of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments, a list and selected pictures of conference participants, and links to numerous other Web resources on women's history and the activities of women leaders before the Civil War. Especially useful for teachers and students is a time line placing the Seneca Falls Convention within the context of other political and cultural events of the 1840s and 1850s. <http://www.nps.gov/wori/>

Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1830-1930. Maintained by the University of New York at Binghamton, this site features historical documents related to women and social movements in the U.S. between 1830-1930, arranged topically. <http://womhist.binghamton.edu/index.html>

National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection, 1848-1921. This site, part of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress' American Memory Project, is one of several in a collection on suffrage. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/naw/nawshome.html> The second site of this collection, **"Votes for Women" Suffrage Pictures, 1850-1920**, contains portraits, cartoons, photographs, and a time line. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/vfwhtml/vfwhome.html> **One Hundred Years Toward Suffrage: An Overview**, the third site, looks at efforts toward suffrage divided into three historical time periods: 1776-1850, 1851-1899, and 1900-1920. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/vfwhtml/vfwtl.html>

Not for Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. This site is maintained by PBS Online and provides material to supplement PBS programming on this topic. It contains historical information, documents, lesson plans, and links to other resources. <http://www.pbs.org/stantonanthony/>

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most large libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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Teaching with Historic Places. M'CLINTOCK HOUSE: A HOME TO THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT. Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1999. ED 434 051.

Wellman, Judy. BE YOUR OWN HISTORIAN: SENECA FALLS AND THE 1848 WOMEN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION. Seneca Falls, NY: Women's Rights National Historic Park's Visitor Center, 2001. For ordering information, call (315) NAT-PARK (628-7275).

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